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Watson, Samuel Newell

A nation's peril and a nation's opportunity

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A Nation's Peril

AND

A Nation's Opportunity

A PLEA FOR OUR COUNTRY
MADE ON THANKSGIVING DAY, 1915

In the American Church of The Holy Trinity
in the Avenue de l'Alma, Paris

By S. N. WATSON, *The Rector*

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED IN PARIS, FRANCE
NOVEMBER, 1915, BY REQUEST

A NATION'S PERIL
AND
A NATION'S OPPORTUNITY

"It is good for me that I have been afflicted ; that I may learn Thy statutes."—PSALMS 119, *v.* 71.

I AM faced with a very solemn duty which is not easy to perform. I am called upon by the Civil Authority to tell you that we, as Americans ought to be thankful today, *as Americans;* and to tell you WHY we ought to be thankful.

I have studied the words of that call of the Civil Authority ; and I cannot find in it great cause for Thankfulness. I find it stated there that this year which has passed has been "a year of special blessing for us," because, "another year of Peace has been vouchsafed to us." That certainly cannot mean internal peace ; for the Nation has been rent and torn by internal dissensions verging often perilously near to civil war. There is nothing in that to be thankful for as Americans. It must mean peace with other nations of the earth—if that can indeed be called peace which has actually been an armed neutrality ; the neutrality being our part, and the possibility of it being that interference by arms of the British fleet which alone has made our attitude of fictitious neutrality possible. Are we to be thankful for that? Is it a peace to be thankful for at home—that condition of affairs which has made of the Republic the fighting ground of alien tribes of un-Americans? Is it a thing to be thankful for that American citizens are murdered by hundreds while our government boasts of a peace which is the result of Britain's Navy keeping from our coasts what would otherwise be the swift answer to our impotent threats that we would leave nothing undone to protect our Nationals?

To be thankful for peace with other nations means to be thankful that we are not at war with Germany ; and we can be thankful for that to the Kaiser, if we want to be thankful on that subject at all. The Power that out of insane egotism and brutal lust of domination thrust Europe into this conflict alone determines whether it is War or Peace for us, and to talk of peace in such a case is to "Cry Peace when there is no Peace." Let no one think that I counsel War ; or that I have ever counselled War, or thought War to be desired, *ab initio*, for its own sake. No one who lives through this horrible nightmare we are passing through, which seems sometimes more like a bad dream which we must wake from, than anything else, could ever want War. But, War is not the original issue, ever, except with brutes. War is a consequence. War is the thing which may follow a choice, but it is not the choice itself. Brutes may choose War ; men do not. Men, honest men, may make a choice which may be followed by War ; a choice

which is the solution of a moral issue forced on one, and over which, if honest, one has no control, except to make the honest choice; and if war comes, it is the consequent; and no man or nation ever lived a moral life, which facing an issue involving a moral choice, based its decision not on the moral issue, but on what might be the consequences if one made the moral choice. The first issue in any such case as that which confronts us is not peace or war; to state it so, is purposely to befog the moral issue. Choose the finest, rightest, most honorable course; stand for the right, and uphold the right, and proclaim the right; and rebuke foul wrong; and ask no questions as to consequences. For Peace at any price we cannot as Americans be thankful. But, that facing great moral issues we should have chosen before the world, and in the face of all comers, to proclaim the right, and to stand for the right, and to rebuke the wrong and to uphold the weak and the injured; and to have abhorred the selfish part of considering our own safety first, and to have scorned to take that safety at the price of the blood and treasure of others; for that, as our National part in the world's life, we as Americans, could be deeply thankful for this day.

I read further in this same call of the Civil Power that we are to be thankful because "We have prospered while other people were at war." I shrink a little at being asked to repeat those words; they sound so perilously near saying that WE have prospered BECAUSE other people have been at war. It cannot have been meant so. But, even taking that statement at its best—to be thankful that "we have prospered while other people were at war"—Is what is here called prosperity, money prosperity, business prosperity,—Is that the highest good? Is it a thing to be thankful for just by itself alone, without regard to what else it means? Can it not be bought at too high a price? England, France, certainly poor little Belgium, might also have said the same. Let us change the attitude of Belgium in imagination today; and let us suppose that Belgium had quietly and peacefully yielded in August, 1914; and Belgium might join with us today, and King Albert might join with us today, in saying: "We are thankful that WE have prospered while other people have been at war;—Cities untouched; people alive instead of being murdered; trade and factories even multiplied in output." Belgium! Belgium! the moral glory of the world dimmed like that, for the sake of any prosperity that the covetous or cowardly heart of man ever dreamed of! At least we can be proud of human kind that it never did so happen. And the moral abyss into which Germany has descended is shewn in this, that to this day Germany cannot understand WHY it did not so happen in Belgium.

Prosperity purchased at the price of moral subservience to Iniquitous Wrong or to Brutal Power is a cause for shame, infinite shame. But, that in face of an opportunity to roll up money as we have never rolled it up before; in face of a chance to be, after this war is over, the richest nation on the earth with all the rest impoverished beside us; in face of a chance to shift to our side the financial centre of the world; in face of a chance

to continue our amassing of wealth and our spending of wealth for pleasure; that we should have bravely counted it all as little worth in the balance, and that we should have courageously and firmly, despite foreign-made treason at home, and despite the insulting assumption of our venality abroad, set ourselves without hesitation to the maintaining of those traditions of a free and sovereign people handed down to us by the Fathers of the Republic; let that mean crushing out alienism in America, or let it mean facing America's enemies on this side the Atlantic with other weapons than law-book phrases; that we should thus have stood as Americans before the world; that were something for which we as Americans would have a right and a duty to be profoundly grateful this day.

The closing thought in that call of the Civil Authority to Thankfulness, is the finest of all, and could not be left out, even from a song of PEACE and Prosperity. It reads this way, and it reads solemnly, and I call upon you to hear it solemnly: "Out of darkness and perplexity have come firmer counsels of policy, and clearer perceptions of the essential welfare of the Nation;" and we may translate those words to mean this: That out of this hour of peril, this hour in which our own Nation stands in greater peril than any other Nation on earth—because infinitely worse than war is the loss of the National Soul, the Nation's concept of its God-given meaning;—out of this hour of peril for the Nation has been forced home to the Nation's consciousness the imperative need of setting its life to other keys than Peace or Prosperity at any price. Our danger has forced us to reckon with the fact that Principle must guide our National Policy, and not Expediency; that we must take counsel of the Nation's past, of the Nation's beginnings, of the principles which animated the Founders of the Nation: that we may see which way we are drifting, and that we may read the compass before the rocks are too near to keep the Ship of State from off them.

This is our cause for thankfulness today: "It is good for me that I have been in trouble; because now may I learn Thy Law." Rulers and people in America are waking to it, are asking What is the meaning of a Republic? What was the meaning of this Republic? What is essential that a Republic shall endure—essential as the Fathers of the Republic who laid well the foundations saw it? And how have we departed from it? And how we may return to those essentials again?

And those questions take us back to that First Thanksgiving Day, and to the America that then was only beginning, but beginning in such superb idealism. Because they took counsel of God and conscience first above every other consideration, and set at naught peril to life and peril to prosperity that they might serve God and conscience unhindered, and that they might succor the needy and might establish a freedom which meant freedom from the tyranny of any one Nation over the destiny and life of any other people; for reasons such as these, and because of faith in these reasons, the Forefathers left the old House of the Race to

set up a new House in a new Land. They were people of such devotion to their ideals that they would tolerate no breaking down of things to them sacred ; and those others of other than our British-Norman stock who came to join them came quickly under the domination and the inspiration of those ideals ; and there were no aliens, but a united people.

Joining themselves to the Cavalier stock who were the first settlers, the stock which peopled the South ; and to the Puritans who came next and who settled New England — these both of pure British-Norman blood — there came the Dutch from Holland to found New Amsterdam ; there came the Swedes who settled the Delaware river country ; there came a good class of people of German origin who settled parts of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Dutch we call them ; these newer-comers were all absorbed into the National life, and became Americans : but it was the British-Norman concept of the meaning of Government, with its superb idealism which inspired them, and which dominated the meaning of the growing National life. And this is it : *Government is the corporate expression of a body of INTELLIGENT free-holders held together by a single-hearted devotion to Justice and Liberty for themselves and for all the world ;* the people shall decree that expression ; the Judiciary shall interpret its meaning in conformity to the fundamental purpose of the Nation's life ; and the Executive shall carry out the people's will as so interpreted ; that was the meaning of a Republic, as the founders dreamed of it, and as they created it, in faith in God and Man. It was a perilous venture to make, to set afloat that Ship of State, whose voyage depends for its safety on two essential factors, the crew and the compass ; intelligent free-holders, the crew must be ; and the Compass must be Faith in God and Man, not Materialism. Trust the control of the Ship of State to a crew of venial men in the majority, who take counsel of their own desires for the moment ; and to whom the Stars have no voice of guidance, and whose compass is their own gain ; and there is no need to ask whether the ship is in peril. It IS in peril ; but, we thank God, we believe the people are awaking to it. And what is the peril ? The peril, under our concept of the meaning of a Republic, is the UNLIMITED BALLOT. I repeat what I have said before, We have put the power to govern into hands unfit to exercise it. Given a united people, first and above all a people of one blood, if that were possible, a people of one race-tradition ; or at least, if an amalgamated people, a people inspired by that one idealism ; and you may trust the power to govern unlimitedly to the hands of the people ; under those conditions, a Republic of our type is a possibility. But, open the Nation's gates to people of every race under heaven ; illiterate, absolutely lacking in our British-Norman concept of the worthwhileness of life, of the meaning of a race's destiny ; coming to us for no desire of making their life a part of that high destiny, but solely that they might increase their possibility of creature comfort and material gain ; let this horde of aliens drown in its unwholesome flood the old stock and choke its power of expression,

and thwart its possibility of keeping untarnished its idealism ; give to this materialistic majority the ballot, the power to govern, the right to voice the Nation's Policy ; and that Voice will be hopelessly Materialism, and an absolute denial of any Faith in the Nation's Destiny, as the Fathers conceived its meaning and intent.

And we may thank God today for this, that the stupidity and bestialism of political Germanism, which is the domination over physical life of a brute materialism, pushed to its lying and treacherous limit in a land not its own, where it claimed the rights of ancient friendship, has wakened the American people—or at least enough of them—to see what is the meaning of the domination of the same materialism over the National Soul in America. What the remedy shall be, and how it shall be applied, I dare not be prophet enough to say. But I have this sure word of prophecy : In the glorious Gospel of the Son of Man, the most comforting word to me is this, that it is said of one who wandered in a far country, and who fed amongst the swine, that his hour of redemption began when "He came to Himself," when he saw himself for what he was, when he realized his heritage of right and what he had been doing with it. And so I believe this Hour of a Nation's Peril is the Hour of the Redemption of a Nation's Honor. And that just as this fair France, re-born by its superb idealism and its Faith in its destiny to undreamed force and power, shall ere long drive in ignominious defeat the invader from her soil ; so shall the Land of the Free, now for the first time recognizing her danger, shake off these fetters which chain her to the earth, and in the doing, shall turn and rend politician or party which attempts to thwart her in the doing it.

America shall not go down to the dust to be counted but another idle dream of a race not worthy to be free. The name has meant too much to the world's past, means too much to its future ; and the Republic shall yet stand on the foundations the Fathers laid. Only, only, this we pray, "God give us men ;" REAL MEN IN HIGH PLACES ; leaders of the people, not trucklers to the mob ; leaders who dare command, and take no order save from conscience ; who will willingly go down to personal and political defeat rather than temporize with treason and with crime ; knowing well that the blood of only a few such martyrdoms is the seed of a people's redemption.

So shall we come to our own again ; and America, a glorified America, shall proudly say :—

> "Honor has come back as a King to earth,
> And paid his subjects with a royal wage,
> And nobleness walks in our ways again,
> And we have come into our heritage."

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